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SUBJECT: A WALK THROUGH DAKAR: THE PEOPLE SPEAK

Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER OSMAN N. TAT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) A pre-election walk through Dakar,s vibrant Medina district and the city,s principal domestic bus station revealed five themes on the minds of the populace. It is the duty of every citizen to vote; the opposition boycott is ill-conceived and undermines Senegal,s democracy; the cost of living is crushingly high; President Wade is imperfect but doing a good job; and the National Assembly is ineffective.
END SUMMARY.

MEDINA AND THE BUS STATION

2. (SBU) Medina is a vibrant but poor borough located next to Dakar,s Plateau district. The street that Poloff and Pol FSN walked down is about a kilometer long and features small ramshackle businesses, hardware stores, carpentry shops, restaurants, and street-side laundromats where groups of women hand-wash clothes in plastic bins and residences. The second site is Dakar,s principal bus station from where buses leave for the country,s interior.

ELOQUENCE, FATALISM AND PHILOSOPHY

3. (SBU) Poloff and Pol FSN interviewed a dynamic cross-section of people aimed at gauging the public,s interest and concerns prior to the June 3 legislative election. This walk revealed a very well informed public with strong political opinions and, above all, a pride in Senegal,s democratic tradition. All interviewees were frank in their views, hospitable and quick to invite us into their homes or to sit down on their benches to wax eloquent and philosophical about their and the country,s situation. One female head of household, whose polygamous husband is living with his two other wives while she lives with her aging mother and the rest of the family,s female population, compared Senegal,s political scene to the fingers of a hand, saying that while each finger might be of different lengths they all make up the same hand. In her well-appointed living room off a courtyard-style house she unconsciously gave a sense of fatalism whose roots are deeply lodged in Senegal,s syncretic Islam. Underlining that it is vital to accept the cards one is dealt in life, she, and many other we interviewed, said that in the end God is the ultimate judge of people,s behavior -- this in answer to whether or not the deputies in the National Assembly are effective or not.

A CITIZEN MUST VOTE

4. (SBU) Of the 50 plus people interviewed every one underscored the importance of voting, saying that this is the duty of a citizen in a democracy. When asked whether or not these elections were important to them, many people

acknowledged the weakness of the National Assembly as an institution but said that they would vote anyhow. Almost every person interviewed also voted in the February 25 presidential election and coupled the two elections together by saying that voting in one and not the other did not make much sense.

THE OPPOSITION IS MISGUIDED

15. (C) Just about every interviewee forcefully dismissed the boycott as infantile and said that they and their extended families would be at the polls on June 3. Many citizens, including those who identified themselves as Socialists, admitted to not really having an idea as to why the opposition had decided to boycott the elections. Some speculated that they were sore losers and did not want to be humiliated by Wade again, while others went as far as accusing the opposition of sabotaging and destroying Senegal's democracy. An elderly gentleman, who was at first reluctant to talk, saying that his time was better spent in prayer, said that the boycotters should stop complaining: &You must do your part, otherwise the system won't function8. This same sentiment was echoed by the owner of a carpentry shop who said: &The boycott is bad, there needs to be balance in the parliament, even one opposition deputy is better than none8.

THE COST OF LIVING IS KILLING US

16. (SBU) Rising prices for basic staples such as rice, cooking oils, fuel, water and electricity, as well as jobs are at the forefront of the electorate's mind. At the bus station one eloquent young man from Kaolack said in fluent French that he realized his was not a real job (NOTE: He is

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working as a jack-of-all-trades at the depot doing whatever work is available. END NOTE.), but that life was hard and he had no other choice if he wanted to survive. He then added that his dream is to &immigrate to Canada.8 In a similar message a local fruit seller informed us that he had only sold 2 apples, 1 kilo of bananas and a few cigarettes in the six hours since he had opened his stand at what looked like a well located position. He said that people just do not have the money to spend. In fact, every single person who we interviewed repeated that their chief concern is the cost of living.

WADE IS GREAT

17. (C) We heard, &Wade is Working;8 &Il Est un Grand Ouvrier8 (he is a great worker); &Things Have Changed for the Better;8 and &He is compassionate, tolerant8. Like slogans from a political campaign, people had only praise for Wade, saying that despite his faults, he has the good of Senegal at heart and that it is his entourage that is dysfunctional. Equally revealing, most people who will vote for Wade's Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS) admitted that they are actually voting for him and not his party. A Shell gas attendant said the differences are obvious if you compare Wade's tenure with the previous socialist regimes. Looking around him he said, &None of these things were here before Wade: that bridge, that road, and these buildings you see.8

THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY: USELESS!

18. (C) Without a doubt the National Assembly will be the big looser in this election. While everybody said they will vote, they will do so more out of civic duty than enthusiasm for the institution for which they are casting their votes. Most people are looking to hand President Wade a majority so that he can finish the work that he has begun. Words such as &corrupt8, &dysfunctional8, and &useless8 were often used to describe the legislature.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) The people,s faith in Senegal,s Executive Branch remains strong, and there is general respect for Wade and what he is trying to do for the country. If one is to make a projection from these interviews, the opposition has seriously miscalculated and is in trouble, as by and large the people will vote on June 3. Yet, they are not voting because they particularly care about the National Assembly, but are doing so because as citizens in a democracy they see this as their right and duty. This sense of citizenry bodes well for the future of Senegal,s democracy and yet in the same breath it can also be said that the apathy that surrounds the National Assembly as an institution equally threatens Senegal,s democratic tradition -- a tradition that people are very proud to uphold. END COMMENT.

¶10. (U) Visit Embassy Dakar,s SIPRNET website at <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/af/dakar>.
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